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ABSTRACT

The late Donald C. Stewart's assertion that "the era of the cognitive psychologists is waning; the era of the social constructionists is just beginning" drew attention to a major ontological and epistemological shift in composition studies. This shift demanded a methodology to accommodate it. Some composition researchers have considered ethnography, a methodology appropriated from anthropology, as an alternative. The many points of view about methodology in the composition research communiuty can be consolidated into two perspectives: traditional and revisionist. Although in certain ways these two cadres share some similarities, they also differ markedly in others. Traditionalists impose an organizational structure on their texts and usually report their ethnographies from an omniscient third-person point of view. In revisionist ethnographies where the researcher takes an active role in constructing knowledge, the text has no rigid format. Because traditionalist ethnography tends to be more efficient, pragmatic, and utilitarian than revisionist ethnography, the former should hold the methodology's center, at least for the purpose of assessing writing programs. (SAM)

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Ethnography as a Composition Research Genre: Establishing a Methodological Center for Assessing Writing Programs

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In a 1988 article in *Rhetoric Review* titled "Collaborative Learning and Composition: Boon or Bane?" the late Donald C. Stewart drew attention to a major ideological shift in composition studies. He concluded that "the era of the cognitive psychologists is waning; the era of the social constructionists is just beginning." Indeed, this new constructionist "paradigm," if I may be permitted to borrow Thomas Kuhn's overworked term, signifies a profound shift in both ontology and epistemology. Those of us who embrace constructionism no longer assume that a positivist world exists "out there," governed by immutable natural laws and mechanisms which can be summarized in the form of time- and context-free generalizations. No longer do we view the inquirer as a distant, noninteractionist and objective observer. On the contrary, constructionists assume a world of multiple socially and experientially based mental constructs where knowledge is made locally through the process of interaction between the inquirer and the inquired into.

Concomitant with this ontological and epistemological shift has come a search for a methodology to accommodate it. The composition community's prevaling methodology, experimentalism, assumes a positivist world view and is therefore inappropriate for the emerging paradigm. One alternative some composition researchers have considered is ethnography, a methodology which they have appropriated from the discipline of anthropology. Ethnography, however, is so new to the field of composition studies

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that it is not yet clearly defined. In the words of Stephen North, it has developed "no methodological center."

In his landmark 1987 book, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field*, North reviews a survey of the literature on ethnographic research done in the field of composition studies by Kirby, Kantor and Goetz and concludes that the authors define the methodology by contrasting it with other methodologies. In effect, they define ethnography by *what it is not* rather than by *what it is.* It is *not* positivist-based experimentalism. Yet, North also seems to imply that in order to legitimize ethnography, Kirby, Kantor and Goetz pander to the positivist research establishment by trying to link ethnography to more well-established methodologies, such as experimentalism.

The problem which I want to address today, however, is *not* the legitimization of ethnography for experimentalists. I have a feeling that the only argument which might resonate with them, given their ontological and epistemological commitments, is the one that I would consider least powerful in establishing ethnography as a bona fide methodology in composition research. That is that ethnography is a hypothesis-generating methodology, a sort of adjunct methodology which assists experimentalism by generating hypothesis for verification by experimentation. Ethnography is both ontologically and epistemologically incompatible with experimentalism. Since it views all knowledge as local, it cannot engage in generalization or prediction, and its knowledge cannot accumulate as experimental knowledge accumulates. Furthermore, because it is a hermeneutical methodology where the interpretation of the researcher is paramount, it cannot claim objectivity on the part of the observer.

The problem I *do* want to address is that of the definition of the methodology within the composition research community, because I believe that ethnographers, as they begin to mature in this field, are starting to consolidate the many points of view that North

identifies in his survey review into two perspectives. I'll call the adherents of one perspective the "traditionalists" and the adherents of the other perspective "the revisionists." I hesitate to name individuals representative of these two cadres of researchers because I want to draw a couple of generalized portraits to which no ethnographer is likely to fit perfectly, and, moreover, I see these two groups as still emerging rather than solidly established. Nonetheless, as examples of traditionalists, I'll identify researchers like Lee Odell, Dixie Goswami and Stephen Doheny-Farina. The revisionists might include Sondra Perl and Nancy Wilson, whose 1986 book *Through Teachers Eyes: Portraits of Writing Teachers At Work*, exhibits many of the characteristics of this group. Incidentally, I don't want to leave the impression that this problem of definition is limited to the composition research community. On the contrary, I believe the same struggle for definition is taking place in anthropology itself, with traditionalists perhaps best exemplified in the classic work of Evans-Pritchert and the revisionists represented by the work of younger anthropologists like Kevin Dwyer, author of *Moroccan Dialogues*. (In anthropology, by the way, these two groups would be labeled the ethnographic realists and the ethnographic experimentalists. I am reluctant to use these terms, however, because of the confusion caused by using the word "experimental" in two very different senses.)

I want to try now to draw portraits of the two cadres, again with the caveat that I can give only crude approximations because the two groups are still in the process of consolidating. Also, I want to make clear that I don't view one form of ethnography as better than the other. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses. I do, however, view the traditionalist brand of ethnography as more appropriate to writing program assessment, a point which I will return to later.

Let's begin with some similarities. Both traditionalists and revisionists view context as paramount in studying writing. Both agree that the ultimate goal of all ethnography is, to borrow a phrase

from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, to describe an "imaginative universe," i.e., to describe a writing context. Both reconstitute an imaginative universe, or a writing context, through "thick descriptions," i.e., through intelligible interpretations of social events, behaviors, institutions and processes, by focusing on the "flow of social discourse." For both traditionalists and revisionists, this emphasis on deriving meaning through interpretation of the everyday events that occur within a context roots the methodology in the philosophical perspectives of phenomenology and social constructionism. And both groups use fieldwork, interviews, taperecording of group sessions and written artifacts to collect data for analysis.

But traditionalists and revisionists also conceptualize and practice ethnography in identifiably distinct ways. They often differ markedly both in the process by which they achieve their goal of describing an imaginative universe and in the final product that they deliver. In the first place, the two groups view problem formulation differently. While the traditionalists tend to enter a setting with at least a vague notion of what they are going to study guided by their knowledge of the literature of their field, revisionists let problems for examination emerge from the setting itself. These researchers may spend weeks, or even months, getting acclimated to a setting before they discover a problem worthy of study.

Secondly, not only do traditionalists have some sense of the problem they will examine, they frequently have a pre-existing conceptual framework for data analysis. Ideally, traditionalists employ what Glaser and Straus (1967) call grounded theory. That is, they let categories for analysis emerge inductively from the data they have collected within the context which they are studying. Then they make connections between analytic categories and develop theories for subsequent verification. In reality, however, traditionalists, who are trained in a disciplinary community where they learn a communal body of theory, seldom are able to approach a setting with a blank slate. In essence, instead of suspending

conceptual frameworks during data collection, traditionalists engage in a dialectic between pre-existing frameworks and the data they collect. They make knowledge with the guidance of their theoretical frameworks and verify that knowledge through a formal process called triangulation, in which they vary their observations and their informants in order to gain multiple perspectives.

Revisionists, on the other hand, tend to be less analytic in their descriptions. To the contrary, instead of producing analytic reports, they write narratives, which they sometimes call "stories" or "fictions." Furthermore, as researchers they are more likely to be active participants in the social life of the universe they are studying, rather than objective observers, like the traditionalists who look on from a distance. They view knowledge making as an interaction between subject and object, between the Self and the Other. In order to acknowledge their influence, though, revisionists reflect on how their biases, preunderstandings and intellectual commitments affect the culture which they are examining. To minimize that influence, these researchers abandon their own filters of perception in favor of allowing informants to describe their culture in their own terms. While revisionists attempt to gather multiple perspectives, the knowledge they make is less subject to formal verification.

Just as they follow distinct research processes, the two cadres also construct distinct products. Traditionalists impose an organizational structure on their texts. This structure is not as formal as a typical quantitative report with obligatory sections on statement of the problem, review of the literature, statement of the hypothesis, description of the research design, description of measurement techniques, statement of the results, interpretation of the results and summary of the conclusions. Nonetheless, a traditionalist text is organized around some standard format, which is a ready-made heuristic device through which investigators develop and arrange the topics that they are examining. Furthermore, writers of traditionalist ethnographies often situate problems for examination with in the corpus of community

literature. Also, traditionalist ethnographies are reported from an omniscient third-person point of view with the researcher forced into the background. The suppression of the author tends to give the resulting text a tone of objectivity.

In contrast, in revisionist ethnographies where the researcher takes an active role in constructing knowledge, the text has no rigid format. Thus, the investigator is forced to impose her own form on it, which requires that she, rather than the discipline, invent and arrange topics for the investigation. There is then no ready-made heuristic for the ethnographer, who must let the methodology and the data collected from research done living and working in the culture inform her about invention and arrangement. Revisionist ethnographers often write in a casual, first-person, self-revealing style that skillfully juxtaposes dialect against scholarly language. Tone and imagery demonstrate personal involvement of the author with a project. Revisionists often take novel stances in their texts to establish authority. For example, as Kristine Hansen points out, they may play the role of a child learning the rules of a game or a translator decoding cultural performances.

In differentiating the two groups of ethnographers, I like to draw an analogy to the work of the writers John McPhee and Tom Wolfe because I see the traditionalist view of process and knowledge reflected in the work of McPhee and the revisionist view in the work of Wolfe. McPhee tends to draw precise, realist, "objective" portraits of his subjects--whether they are oranges, birchbark canoes or the residents of the New Jersey Pine Barrens--which he verifies through a wealth of detail. The hallmarks of his prose are clarity, authenticity and, above all, accuracy. Although he is often present at the events that he describes, his narrative presence in the text is barely noticeable. On the other hand, Wolfe is a leader of the New Journalist movement whose work is guided by several overarching principles. The New Journalists tell stories by moving from scene to scene rather than resorting to historical narrative, use dialogue to involve readers and define characters, take

novel narrative stances by manipulating point of view, record everyday gestures, habits, manners and customs, and frequently eliminate transitions so as to produce a seemingly unrelated montage of scenes whose meaning readers must interpret for themselves.

In his critique of ethnography, Stephen North would, I believe, embrace the group that I have called the revisionists, on the grounds that the traditionalists have abandoned the methodology's phenomenological and constructionist roots. I believe that he is essentially correct in that criticism. In several ways, I think the traditionalists are less than pure in their phenomenological and constructionist commitments. It seems to me, for example, that they still make some pretense to objectivity by avoiding observer reflection. Thus, they do not acknowledge their own biases and, consequently, the theory-ladenness of the analyses that they conduct. Furthermore, because they are more likely to be observers in a setting than participants, they are less likely to engage in the kind of interaction between Self and Other necessary to construct knowledge.

Nonetheless, I want to make an argument that the traditionalists should hold the methodology's center, at least for the purpose of assessing writing programs. Despite the fact that traditionalists are not phenomenological or constructionist purists, they do develop comprehensive portraits of a writing context. Moreover, the two most critical weaknesses of traditionalist ethnographers, the theory ladenness of their observations and the consequent structure that they impose on their texts, can be monitored through the practice of working in teams, where several perspectives have to be reconciled in dialectical discussions. This team collaboration is the basis for true constructionist knowledge.

But I also favor traditionalist ethnography because it is more efficient, pragmatic and utilitarian than revisionist ethnography, which is a particularly time-consuming enterprise. From start to finish, for instance, Perl and Wilson's *Through Teachers Eyes* took

four years to complete. In contrast, our study for the Center for Talented Youth took seven weeks from the beginning of data collection to the completion of final reports. Furthermore, traditionalist writing assessments focus attention on issues that will be useful to writing program administrators. These issues include the philosophical and pedagogical outlooks of the teachers studied and the interactions that take place between teachers and students. In its purest form, revisionist ethnography allows problems for study to emerge from immersion in context, a practice which is unrealistic for researchers who have limited time in and access to a setting, as is almost always the case in writing assessments. Moreover, the concise reporting format of traditionalist ethnography makes information easily accessible and disseminable. The narrative form which revisionist ethnography dictates, usually requires dissemination of results in booklength texts. That's particularly frustrating for busy writing program administrators who need information that is quickly and easily accessible. Also, it makes the quick reporting of findings to practitioners and other researchers impossible because no journals can accommodate such lengthy reports.